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Islamic Radicalism in the Arabian Peninsula: Growing Risks

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Conclusions

- Political radicals using Islam as "the answer" are gaining support and influence in the Arabian Peninsula states. They demand the establishment of truly Islamic government, an end to rule by unjust, corrupt, "unislamic" leaders, and the elimination of foreign--especially U.S.--influence and interests. Since Operation Desert Storm, Islamic radicals also question whether too much of the nation's wealth is going for unneeded U.S. military hardware and excessive dependence on U.S. military protection.

- U.S. policy in the Arabian Peninsula is based primarily on protecting the free flow of oil through the Gulf and promoting regional stability. The United States maintains a policy of "respectful neutrality" regarding Islam, recognizing it as one of the world's great religions and deploring those who use it to justify acts of terrorism and violence.

- Many Islamic radicals regard the United States as hypocritical in not supporting their quest for traditional American values: elections, civil liberties, human rights. Regimes, on the other hand, assume U.S. support in resisting Islamists' demands for reform because of shared interests and treaty commitments. These range from oil and protection of sea lanes to defense against perceived Islamist threats to their stability and well-being.

- Peninsula regimes with close U.S. ties are increasingly becoming targets for more violence-prone Islamic extremists. These extremists could conduct acts of terror against regime and U.S. interests in those countries where the U.S. military presence is highly visible and expanding, and local security forces may not be able to detect or contain the threat. Bahrain is probably the government most at risk.

Background

The Peninsula states of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman are under growing pressure from outspoken critics who use the language and authority of Islam in these overwhelmingly conservative Muslim societies to call for political and economic reform. The rise of a radically activist Islamic politics predates the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran, but Sunni and Shia

Muslim radicals received significant boosts from the establishment of Islamic government in Tehran and, more recently, from the Gulf War in 1990-91.

Regional specialists from the government, the academic community, and the private sector debated the impact of radicalized Islamic politics on the regimes and U.S. interests in recent roundtables at the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS). They agreed that Islamic radicals throughout the region have common perceptions of the causes of their societies' ills. These include dissatisfaction with ruling families that are deemed unfit to rule; deep frustration over diminishing economic entitlements, rising unemployment, the inability of the traditional tribal, patriarchal system to provide for a population that is increasingly younger, poorer, and larger; and the sense that traditional government by tribal consensus no longer works.

The specialists noted that many radical groups agree on common goals, such as the establishment of "pure" Islamic government, rule by religious *(sharia)* law, the elimination of foreign (read U.S.) influence, and the concept of *jihad* as a political as well as a personal struggle. The radicals do not, however, agree on tactics. In some countries, like Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, more moderate Islamists are able to push their agendas within the bounds of the political systems; in Kuwait, Islamists have been elected to the National Assembly and openly challenge the government on policy issues. They are questioning, for the first time, the Al Sabahs' failure to defend the country against Iraq, its expenditures of money invested in the special Reserve Fund for Future Generations, and corruption. By contrast, in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman, virtually all Islamic radicals are seen as a threat to be outlawed and contained, by force if necessary.

Several recent developments in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Oman raise the specter of violent change and potential efforts to disrupt regime-U.S. ties.

- *The November 13, 1995 bombing at SANG headquarters in Riyadh in which five Americans died.* Three previously unknown groups--the Tigers of the Gulf, the Ansar Allah, and the Islamic Movement for Change--claimed responsibility for the attacks and threatened to continue them "until the departure of the last American soldier" from Saudi Arabia.

- *Recurrent unrest in Bahrain, including street demonstrations, bombings, and arson fires.* In January, following several days of protests, the government arrested a leading Shia cleric and several hundred supporters allegedly for plotting to destabilize the regime. Dissident demands focus on economic reform, restoration of the parliament dissolved in 1975, and an end to political and economic discrimination against the majority Shia community. The U.S. Navy (NAVCENT) has extensive facilities here with 500-600 military and civilian personnel on shore. No U.S. interests have been directly threatened yet but two luxury hotels have been bombed.

- *The discovery of clandestine Muslim Brotherhood cells in Oman and the UAE* which were allegedly plotting the overthrow of the Qaboos regime in Muscat. Muscat, Abu Dhabi, and Dubai allow the United States access to facilities and provide local support.

"Islam is the Answer"--but What was the Question?

Changing economic and social conditions in the Gulf over the past five years are increasing the pressure on regimes to reform and enhancing the appeal of radical Islamist parties as the primary vehicle to seek political change. Islamist-oriented groups, whether allowed to operate overtly in local political institutions and mosques or forced underground, are seen by many as the only alternative--and the most

easily comprehensible one--to the government. Several factors are shaping this view:

- *Loss of faith in Arab nationalism* as a credible solution to regional weakness. In its stead, a radical Islamic theology of social protest is gaining popularity. Islamic radicals are able to shape the tone and terms of political discourse, often with the simple formula, "Islam is the answer."

- *Dashed economic expectations and decline* in societies where the citizens--a minority of the population in several of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries--once were cushioned from economic shock waves, such as inflation, taxes, unemployment. The result in many cases is increased corruption and repression by government officials, their families, and private citizens to maintain their privileged positions.

- *Generational time shift* with the majority of the populations under the age of 16 and with transitions underway in several countries as a newer, younger group claims leadership.

- *Surfing the 'Net'* by dissidents abroad and at home, enabling easy passage of information about local conditions, organizational activities, requests for money and other forms of assistance, and operational instructions. Regimes no longer have the capability to block out news by simply monitoring the mail, banning books, and confiscating cassettes.

- *Changing face of the security threat* as the image of the Gulf War recedes and the U.S. presence grows increasingly visible. Iraq, weakened by war and sanctions, is not seen as a significant threat in the short term. Iran is seen as a threat but one that is probably containable through negotiation, pressure from powerful friends, and financial blandishments. Regime leaders tend to see the greatest threat to their security as an internal one spiked by Islamic radicals and their foreign backers. Except for Kuwait, the popular perception sees the absence of a clear physical threat and wonders "do we really need the U.S. forces here and must we pay for it?"

The Glass Half Full . . .

Most roundtable participants agreed that the region is relatively stable, that the traditional style of consensus politics will continue to provide regimes "guidance" on decisionmaking, and that no major wars are likely in the next 5 to 10 years. These specialists were optimistic that regional leaders can successfully contain the risk from radicalized Islamist critics because reliance on traditional concepts of consultation *(shura),* consensus *(ijma),* justice *(adil)* and local institutions--especially that of the extended family--will prevail and maintain order. One observer noted that democracy is not the issue, participation is; corruption is not the problem, avarice is; and government is not important, family is. Military representatives were confident of their ability to deal with regional stability and the capability of U.S. forces to expand their presence to deter external aggression in the region.

. . . or the Glass Half Empty

Other roundtable participants agreed on the short-term viability of the Gulf regimes but were troubled about the long-term prospects for the regimes and U.S. interests. Academic studies indicate the traditional consultative councils which exist in all the states but Kuwait are not working, that the sense of "legitimacy" for many regimes is declining, and that increased, pervasive corruption is weakening regimes because there is no line distinguishing what is merely tolerable from what is "vulgar." The all important unit--the family--has already broken down. They also note:

- *The traditional relationship between the rulers and the ruled is fragmenting* and public opinion is becoming increasingly polarized under the light of Islamist scrutiny. Those whose political philosophy is not Islamist--secularists, nationalists, and leftist elites-are being marginalized by radical Islamists.

- *The Islamists' vocabulary for change depends on the audience.* To Western audiences, the radical Islamists' discussion of democracy, consultation, elections, reform, and justice implies Western values and concepts. But to local audiences the words carry different meanings: reform *(islah) is* not political reform on a Western model but a return to early Islamic rule; consensus and consultation are not recipes for parliaments, or free elections, or a pluralistic political system; justice is not justice for all.

- *The audience has changed.* The message of the Islamic radicals may be an old one, but it is attracting new audiences. These include once-liberal, Western-educated elites, students, university professors, mid-level government officials, and members of the police and military forces frustrated by what they perceive to be pervasive corruption and by their exclusion from political participation.

Potential Opportunities for Radicalized Islamist Progress: An Indicators List

Looking ahead over the next 5 to 10 years, several developments could provide Islamic radicals with the opportunity to widen their popular base and gain influence over decisionmaking in the Peninsula states.

- *Looming succession crises.* Saudi rulers King Fahd and Crown Prince Abdallah, Kuwait's Amir Jabir al-Ahmad, Bahrain's Amir Isa, and Shaykh Zayid of the UAE are all aging and, in some cases, in ill health. Designated successors exist in all but Oman; some do not share the older generation's relative tolerance for sectarian differences or abilities to smooth over religious and ethnic tensions. *A succession unpopular with large segments of the population could help Islamic radicals gain new supporters and encourage them to challenge the regime.*

- *Networking with foreigners.* Most regimes tend to blame foreign influence rather than domestic problems for the rise of Islamic radicalism. Oman blames outsiders for the presence of a Muslim Brotherhood cell allegedly plotting rebellion. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain hold Iran responsible for local unrest and urban violence. The charges do not entirely hold up to close scrutiny. Iran does encourage Gulf opposition movements but its ability to influence local action is likely overestimated. Events in each country suggest that Islamist demands for reform are becoming popular among secular as well as religious elements of the population, including government and military services. Islamic radicals exchange views and receive support from abroad but outsiders have little leverage over local agendas and operational activities.

- *Converging class and sectarian interests.* In Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Sunni militants are making common cause with Shia radicals to demand political reform and regime accountability. Many are Western-educated scientists, scholars, and technocrats who were once more liberal and secular in their politics. Half the signers of the petitions which began the challenge to the Saudi government in the early 1990s were Islamic clerics and radicals, but the other half were moderate liberals. In Bahrain, religious moderates are being out-shouted and out-maneuvered by increasingly vocal religious extremists.

- *Rising discontent with U.S. policies.* Islamic radicals could capitalize on local grumbling about the

cost and need for a U.S. military presence. Increasingly vocal Saudis, for example, wonder whether the October 1994 and August 1995 claims that Iraq was massing troops on Kuwait's border for an attack was just a U.S. ploy to get the Peninsula states to pay for maneuvers and new equipment. The press in the lower Gulf countries is beginning to criticize openly the U.S. policy of dual containment, saying this is U.S. policy, not "our" policy. Islamic radicals accuse the United States of shoring up corrupt rulers rather than supporting democratic reform.

Recommendations

- *U.S. policy needs to be tailored to local conditions and with an understanding of what can be realistically attained in each society.* Islamic radicalism is not a monolith. A "one-size-fits all" strategy will not work where societies and movements are so diverse and Islamists are pursuing different localized goals.

- *The U.S. military will continue to be welcomed by host governments, but the degree of cooperation could depend increasingly on regime perceptions that Islamists' criticism of U.S. ties weaken legitimacy and on U.S. behavior.* A unilateral drawdown in the face of radical Islamist attacks would raise the anxieties of host governments that the United States is not willing to live up to its security commitments. It would also encourage Islamic militants that the United States was backing down in the face of a threat.

- *The U.S. military can try to reduce its risk by improving communication with host governments, emphasizing the temporary nature of troop deployments, coordinating its "needs" with competing commercial and diplomatic demands on host governments, and lowering its profile in the region.* Demands for more military access and exercises, civilian commercial contracts, and complicated negotiations with host governments may overwhelm local systems and stir up local protest. Reliance on current levels of prepositioned equipment, rapid deployment and drawdown, and simulation exercises could help maintain a U.S. presence.

- *U.S. policymakers need to be aware of economic and demographic trends and declining wealth.* Radical Islamist demands for change do not occur in a vacuum. The issue, more broadly speaking, is the ability of Muslim societies to cope with and afford change. Most of the regimes appear unwilling or unable to make the choices needed to adapt to the demands of modernization and their Islamist critics.

- *U.S. personnel and their dependents need to be better prepared for the culture shock of a prolonged stay in the region.* Actions that, out of ignorance, are seen as disrespectful of local institutions and customs play into the hands of Islamists eager to criticize the United States.

Judith Yaphe is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for National Strategic Studies. This paper is the result of the first in a series of roundtables on Radical Islam and U.S. Interests in the Middle East and North Africa including members of the research and policy communities and the military commands. For more information contact Judith Yaphe at (202) 287-9210 ext. 551; fax at (202) 287-9239; or Internet at yaphej@ndu.edu. NOTE

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